

For God's Sake!—the Need for a Creator in Brooke's *Universal Beauty*

Though his name doesn't spring to the tongue quite as readily as those of Alexander Pope or even Samuel Bowden, Henry Brooke left an indelible mark on the genre of didactic verse with the 1735 publication of his *Universal Beauty*. Unfortunately, though he would go on to write numerous plays, novels and pamphlets, these would bring him even less renown than his initial effort. Later in his life, Brooke became involved in politics, particularly with respect to the ongoing debate over the treatment of Catholics in Ireland. He published less and less frequently in his final decades, falling into a deep depression that some accounts even label insanity. A man of deep faith, Brooke's religious convictions can be seen clearly in his writing. At the same time, however, he was very much a student of the modern sciences, particularly the work of Newton. Through an analysis of *Universal Beauty*'s mechanics and theme, it will be seen that Brooke viewed both the splendor and scientific perfection of the universe as incontrovertible proof of God's divinity.

Universal Beauty is a poem vast in both the scope of its subject matter and its sheer length. Brooke sets out, as he describes in the preface, to put forward a thorough presentation of all beauty in the known universe beginning with "a demonstration, a priori, of the being and attributes of God," and continuing through Creation to the most recent scientific discoveries of his time. The passages in this analysis were chosen for their strong connections to the newest scientific ideas of the time as well as to each other. Though the following analysis will mostly focus on Brooke's interpretation of Newtonian

physics and its relationship with a divine Creator, one should certainly not be left with the impression that this is the sole focus of the poem or even merely one of its six books!

Universal Beauty meanders through such disparate territories as the life sciences and geology; it snakes between both history and myth. Though this analysis may be limited in its range, the work itself assuredly is not.

Brooke frames his ambitious poem in heroic couplets, much like his legendary predecessor Pope. Unlike Pope, however, Brooke rarely keeps his couplets self-contained, instead letting ideas and sentences sprawl across entire stanzas. While this has the effect of removing some of the forcefulness inherent to the couplet, it also allows the poet's words to paint more complete images, each building upon the last. Despite its open couplets, the poem avoids a "conversational" tone; the use of iambic pentameter keeps the poem sufficiently structured to complement its lofty subject matter. As a poet and a scholar, Brooke was simultaneously concerned with aesthetics and structure, so the compromise inherent in his prosody works very well. Extended metaphors abound in the poem, with characters from Greek mythology and great sailing ships taking on such roles as blood circulation and physical laws for countless lines at a time. It is in this attitude, where no detail is too minute to be rhapsodized extensively about, that Brooke leaves his strongest contribution to scientific poetry. Even taking each book as a separate entity, there are still stories within stories within stories to be found, each hinting towards a larger plan in the universe.

One of the strongest themes in *Universal Beauty* is the divinity and omnipotence of God. Though some philosophers studying Newton's new view of nature would go on to question whether there was still a role for God, Brooke clearly had no such difficulty

reconciling natural laws with divine wisdom. From the start of the poem, where he poses a challenge to all non-believers, to his very last line, Brooke makes it abundantly clear that behind each sampling of perfection he details, God's hand is present. After describing a version of Newton's discoveries about light, he continues:

But whence the Light's invigorating force,
Its active energy, or secret source,
Must be ascribed to that Eternal Spring,
Whom First, and Last, and ever Blest we sing--- (II, 65-68)

Brooke wastes no time in reminding the reader that while light has countless amazing properties, they are each and every one bestowed directly by God. In this view, the entire poem's topic—"universal beauty"—refers not to a vast collection of the aesthetically pleasing but rather the universe as a whole, serving as a testament to God's divinity. This is a powerful idea, and Brooke clearly senses its enormity.

In cataloging the wonders of the natural world, Brooke employs a handful of words repeatedly to get his message across. Though this may be due in some part to the finite number of synonyms and similes that can be used to describe gravitational force, there is an undeniable connotative power to these words. Specifically, Brooke uses "wedlock" to describe both the mutual gravitational attraction between masses and, later in Book II, the combinations of the four classical elements. The evocation of marriage, one of the holiest and arguably most "beautiful" acts Man can perform on earth, is exceedingly deliberate. Such is the case also in Book I when Brooke refers to the motion of heavenly bodies:

Still tow' rds the loved enlivening beam they wheel,
And pant, and tremble, like the amorous steel. (I, 97-98)

Amorous steel as a euphemism for magnetism is interesting, but it is even more noteworthy when looked at along with a phrase several lines down, likening the bond between matter to an “amorous touch”. Again, by drawing parallels between Newton’s laws and human intimacy, Brooke is able to simultaneously draw physics—Newton’s “secret spell”—both up to the divine and down to the personal level.

What, then, are the philosophical implications of Brooke’s beautiful universe? A clue can be found in Book II:

Whence we may pierce into the deep profound,
And searching, view the wondrous system round:
For wide as universal Nature spreads,
Light’s sacred fount its streaming luster sheds; (II, 53-56)

Brooke is equating beauty with goodness—the streaming light that may be found anywhere and everywhere is undoubtedly the light of God. Much as the Bible lists miraculous occurrences on Earth, Brooke sees (and details) similar miracles in domains so large and small that they are only visible through scientific discovery. One can get a sense of his motive in writing *Universal Beauty*; what a reaffirming experience it must have been to peer into a new world and find it completely consistent with an existing philosophy! To Brooke, who saw goodness as radiant light, the knowledge that all distant stars spun and burned under the same set of precise rules was the ultimate confirmation of a universe of benevolence.

Though Brooke is not as widely read today as some of his contemporaries, the effect his work left on British poetry is inescapable. Erasmus Darwin openly admitted that much of his inspiration for *The Botanic Garden* came from reading Brooke and indeed, there is a striking similarity between the two works both in subject matter and in style. Pope himself said that with regard to *Universal Beauty* he approved of both the

sentiment and the poetry. Brooke's ideas still persevere today, and if that is only because the works that he inspired received more recognition, so be it. Much as his "warring elements in wedlock bind," Brooke found a way to wed spirituality and science.